

# Women's Rights in Modern Iran. A Study in Contrasts

Modern Iran — A Study in Contrasts, Part I

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*Contrasts? What do you mean?*

Simple. The astonishing divergence between what the carefully-controlled U.S. media depict as normal in Iran and the reality of the situation in the country. I know more than the average American journalist because, with some others, I've just returned from a week in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Let's start with the concerted efforts to brainwash the American people without using soap. Several months ago, American television, radio, and newspapers were full of Iran's mistreatment of women. They focused on problems experienced by a Kurd not wearing a hijab properly, i.e., a scarf covering all the hair. Arrested, she died in custody. Without evidence, the media asserted it was deliberately done by a brutal regime. Naturally, they omitted the close ties between the Kurds in the region, the CIA, and terrorist Israel's external security service, the Mossad, as well as their efforts to effect another Iranian revolution, again returning a Western puppet to power. The American population got nothing in the way of news except that in Iran, women were not people, they could not hold gainful employment or obtain positions of power or trust. The "news" gleefully reported demonstrations, evidently stoked by the Foreign Hand, objecting to enforced head coverings that supposedly erupted all over the country.

Here's an October 2022 excerpt from National Public Radio, which derives part of its budget from the U.S. government: "Protests in Iran following the killing of a young woman, Jina Amini, who also went by the first name of Mahsa, killed at the hands of the morality police last month. The protests center around the enforcement of the hijab..." About the same time, the *New York Times*, a paper close to the American government, opined "The protests since Ms. Amini's death, led by women, have persisted for weeks and have brought Iranians

in dozens of cities into the streets to reveal the depth of their anger. Iranians who are sick and tired of living under a tyrannical theocracy deserve the support of the United States and its allies..." Also in October, NBC News reported "...The authorities are clearly nervous and shaken from the ongoing protests," Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, a professor in global thought and comparative philosophies at SOAS University of London, told NBC News on Thursday via email..."

## Hijab Styles

*The Reality.* First, it's easy to say that the "journalists" can't read. In 2005, Azadeh Moaveni published *Lipstick Jihad*, an account of growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran. In the book, she recounted how Iranian women cocked a snook at the hijab requirement by pushing their hijabs onto the backs of their heads.



Second, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, relaxed the rules on head coverings following the demonstrations. During my visit, I saw many women in their 20s and 30s without head coverings of any sort. They looked to me (and a contact confirmed this) more relaxed. Nearly all had cast aside the traditional black robe and head cloth, wearing instead more colorful jackets in light blue or medium green. One woman was clad in a bright pink sweater. Our interlocutor noted that he believed about 4 in 10 of younger women had cast aside the head covering—in contrast to large signs in English and Farsi (Iran's native tongue) to "Adjust Your Hijab".

Image: Woman Dress Designer & Musician at Tehran Trade Exhibition (Photo: J. Michael Springmann)

In Tehran, Shiraz, and Kerman in mid-February 2023, I saw no demonstrations or violence of any kind—other than that found in the usual traffic jams.

Moreover, Ensiyeh Khazali is Iran's Vice President for Women's and Family Affairs. Her predecessor was Masoumeh Ebtekar. About half the work force is female. In the hotel I stayed at, the Assistant Vice President was a woman. She'd held the post for four years

and, prior to that, had been Marketing Manager for eight.

*At Home.* Family is very important and loving but wives are highly critical of their husbands who see and comment on other women's makeup or hairstyle. One contact noted the recent difficulties he'd had with his wife. He had innocently commented that he had seen a neighbor woman with a new variety of eye shadow. And then asked what was for dinner. He said that his wife's response was "go ask the woman with the eye shadow".

*Uncovered Women and Society.* In talking further with contacts, I elicited the interesting comment, from a man, that he saw no difference in uncovered and covered women interacting with one another. They treated each other in simple conversation as if the clothing difference did not exist. Moreover, he continued, saying that the uncovered exhibited no difference in piety from their completely covered sisters. They went to mosque when ordained, prayed when required, and comported themselves as if they were covered from head to foot in black.

*Hijab Enforcement.* One interlocutor, again a man, spoke out sharply against the concept of the religious police, mostly specially-uniformed women, enforcing the hijab requirement. In his view, the police were there to fight real crime, such as robbery or embezzlement, not to ensure that women's heads were covered. He was grateful that the Supreme Leader had abolished such police.

To be sure, I attended part of the 44<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In the gigantic crowd (filling a six-lane street 13 kilometers/about eight miles long), I saw only one uncovered woman. But then, given the cold day, being covered from head to foot would have been a blessing.



Part of 44th Anniversary Celebration (Photo: J. Michael Springmann)

*What People Do for Fun.* I braced a married Iranian, conveying a question I had and that one of our group had posed. In a society that did not use alcohol or have night clubs, what did younger people do for enjoyment? How could they associate with the opposite sex? (Iran, unlike the U.S. and Western Europe, has only two genders.) His reply was simple and straightforward—private parties, just as set forth in *Lipstick Jihad*.

*Public Displays of Affection.* Several times I observed, in the hotel lobby, on the street, and in public buildings, members of the opposite sex holding hands or walking arm in arm. Surprised at this, given the conservative nature of Iranian society, I again began asking questions. (Like Rudyard Kipling’s “Elephant’s Child”, I am ‘satiably curious.’) The answer was simple yet complicated. The people involved were not casually connected. They were serious about one another and the next step was likely a formal engagement to be married.

*Noses.* Flying from city to city, I noticed a number of young women with bandages on their noses at the various airports. Knowing that Iran was noted for re-working God’s nostril design, I, ever inquisitive, asked an Iranian man about the matter. I said that the people I

had seen in the street or at the airport had beaks in proportion to their faces. There were no bulbous proboscises or hooked, cartoon-witch snouts. His response was that it was, essentially, vanity. Western media, with its image of perfect beauty, had found its way into the country. And women, seeing the perfect faces with the perfect noses in ads or in movies, wanted the same. No matter what. While the breathing apparatus was marginally improved, the concept and the process certainly put some rials into the plastic surgeon's pockets.

Conclusion. The carefully-stoked tensions in Iran over the hijab and the morality police enforcing women's dress did not have quite the effect the CIA, Israel, and hostile outsiders wanted. The country remained calm, women were still women and not wannabe men, as is regrettably common in the U.S. and Western Europe. Family is still intact, wives and husbands are devoted to but highly critical of one another, and the female of the species there wants to look as good as humanly possible—not unlike her sisters elsewhere in the world.

There appears to be some movement towards societal change, as happens in every country. However, the modifications are gradual and do not come with explosive force. Their precursors were apparent years ago. In 2018, on my earlier visit to the Islamic Republic, I noticed women in one of Tehran's airports wearing almost nothing on their heads. One young, attractive female had a ponytail—bound with a large ribbon. This obviously sufficed as a kind of hijab. No one else noticed or said a word.

And, the changes I saw were not earthshaking nor turning society topsy-turvy. They were a logical continuation of accepted earlier alterations. Furthermore, Iran's society might have picked up some Western influences but not to the extent that they will be permitted to poison the culture. Iran will continue to acquire good influences from abroad but reject the bad ones, a very wise view.

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